HOW FAR WILL TRUMP ESCALATE THE WAR IN IRAN?

A White House insider says the president has floated the nuclear option

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President Donald Trump sits next to New York Knicks owner James Dolan as they attend Game Three of the NBA Finals between the San Antonio Spurs and the Knicks at Madison Square Garden in New York on Monday. / Photo by Saul Loeb / AFP via Getty Images.

Four months into a difficult air war with Iran, President Donald Trump's popularity is sinking among American voters. I have been told that in a recent secret meeting in the White House, he began speculating, albeit

vaguely, about a nuclear option that could perhaps bring a quicker end to the war.

It should be said immediately that it was just inside talk to senior staff by a frustrated president. On Monday night Trump was intensely booed at the NBA Finals game between the Knicks and the Spurs at Madison Square Garden in New York City, and polls have consistently indicated that the Democrats will return to a majority in the House this fall and might flip enough Republican seats to gain control of the Senate.

If that happens, there will likely be calls for impeachment proceedings. There is no mixed-martial-arts fight, basketball game, or World Cup soccer match that can change the scenario. Iran has been able to continue producing drones and missiles in underground factories during US and Israeli bombing attacks, and Trump is stuck in a war he may not be able to win before the midterms. The immense US and Israeli intelligence failure about Iran's underground capabilities has rarely been discussed by the Trump administration as the war goes on with no resolution in sight.

I was told that the president's talk about the need to target Iran's underground missile production facilities was along the lines of determining whether the use of a nuclear weapon "was doable." It seemed clear that Trump was aware, as a December, 2025 Congressional Research Survey study put it, that he, as president, has the "sole authority to authorize the use of US nuclear weapons . . . in his Constitutional role as Commander in Chief." The four-star commander of the US Strategic Command is responsible only to give the president advice, when requested.

When Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu initiated a joint air war in Iran in February, Iran responded with surprisingly successful missile and drone attacks on Tel Aviv and other Israeli cities, US military and intelligence bases in the region, and oil and gas production and storage facilities in the Middle East. The vital Strait of

Hormuz has been shuttered, to the shock of White House planners, and remains an international choke point for energy.

It was amid what could be called a “what to do” meeting that a frustrated and angry Trump, perhaps only thinking out loud, raised the issue of using low-yield nuclear weapons to destroy “some” of Iran’s underground missile factories. I was told by someone with extensive knowledge of nuclear weaponry that it was “a very scary and very serious moment.” The president was depicted at this point to be “desperate not to lose in Iran.” His idea was to warn the Iranian leadership that “we are very seriously” considering such an escalation. I was told that the president apparently “was talked out of” any thought of nuclear escalation.

At least one of the aides at the meeting came away disappointed or even shocked that an American president would talk so openly and casually about initiating a nuclear war in the Middle East. Trump’s words were seen by the aide as just another sign of what seemed to be his inability to control dark thoughts, as when he crudely attacked Pope Leo XIV this spring and the pope replied: “Blessed are the peacemakers.”

I was told that the president’s remarks about nuclear escalation in Iran came not at a cabinet session but at a small staff meeting and that the president often “does not control himself” during difficult moments full of bad news. Nonetheless, there were at least a few present who thought it was “very bad” that such thoughts were voiced by a sitting president.

“The failure of the [war with Iran] is on his mind.” I was told. It is not clear whether the president has aides with enough courage to tell him what he should not do.